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GATES STANDS FIRM AS HEARINGS WRAP UP
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WASHINGTON

CIA Director-nominee Robert Gates, facing tough Senate questioning, disputed charges Wednesday he played a role in misleading Congress about the Iran-Contra affair and loyally supported William Casey.

Gates, during a second day of confirmation hearings before the Senate Intelligence Committee, pledged to keep the panel fully informed of agency activities and said he had issued new orders, as acting CIA director, to assure the CIA does not get pulled into covert actions without proper authorization.

For more than three hours, senators probed at Gates' explanation of his role in the Iran arms-Contra aid scandal, particularly why Congress was kept in the dark about the secret weapons deals and not told of suspicions money from the arms sales had been diverted to the Nicaraguan rebels.

Despite some harshly worded questions about "dissembling" and "passing the buck," the session yielded no revelations that appeared to jeopardize his confirmation to succeed Casey and become the youngest CIA director ever.

"There has been no new information gathered here," Sen. William Cohen, R-Maine, vice chairman of the panel, said as the hearing wrapped up.

The committee, however, will not vote on whether to recommend the nomination to the full Senate until after Feb. 26, when the Tower Commission is to deliver a report on its investigation of the National Security Council, the White House agency that carried the ball on the secret Iran arms sales.

Also, the panel plans a closed meeting with Gates, a 20-year CIA veteran and now officially deputy director, after the Tower report, ordered by President Reagan, is presented.

At the end of the hearing, Gates said, "I believe the committee has been very fair." He added he looked forward to "a very good relationship to Congress" if confirmed.

Sen. David Boren, D-Okla., the committee chairman, said the two days of open hearings -- unusual for a CIA nominee -- "demonstrates to the people of this country that we are a government of laws."

Boren said the "thorough" questioning was not spawned by "any hostility toward the nominee but because we have a responsibility to the Senate and the country to be thorough and careful in this process."

Although the hearing was generally amiable and marked by occasional humor, at one point Gates said a question put him "between a rock and a hard place," and Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., pressed hard on Gates' role in helping prepare testimony that Casey delivered to the panel last Nov. 21.

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In that appearance, Casey did not tell the panel about suspicions some money from the Iran arms sales -- which had been exposed in early November -- might have gone to help the Contras. Four days later, Attorney General Edwin Meese revealed the Contra connection to the public, touching off the scandal that has rattled the Reagan presidency.

Specter called the Nov. 21 testimony "skimpy, scanty, uninformative and really misleading," and dismissed Gates' argument that he had only provided "strategic guidance" on its preparation, not the decision on what was -- or wasn't -- included.

Gates, 43, said while he directed subordinates to supply "all the facts" in preparing Casey's testimony and read some preliminary drafts, he would have to check with those who prepared the testimony to find out why Casey was not more forthcoming.

"When you say you have to talk to those who drafted the testimony, again you try to distance yourself from that testimony," Specter replied angrily. "That's a shading which I find to have an element of dissembling."

In a telling exchange, Specter demanded to know whether Gates, if he were a senator, would vote to confirm Casey as CIA chief. "Yes, I would," Gates said.

Casey resigned as CIA chief Feb. 2, six weeks after surgery for a cancerous brain tumor. His role in the secret deals with Iran and efforts to free American hostages in Lebanon, as well as the connection with the Contras, is one of the major factors in investigations of the scandal.

Senators have expressed outrage that the CIA helped make the Iran arms deals without informing Congress. Reagan ordered the agency, in connection with a secret Jan. 17, 1986, intelligence finding authorizing direct U.S. arms sales, not to tell lawmakers. Lawmakers also were disturbed to find the agency had gotten several hints of possibly illegal efforts to aid the Contras but did not relay that information to the oversight committee.